SPORT

Messi return 'unrealistic', says Barca president Laporta

BARCELONA: Barcelona all-time great Lionel Messi returning to the Catalan giants is "unrealistic", the club's president Joan Laporta said Wednesday.

The 38-year-old Argentine superstar made a surprise appearance at Barca's Camp Nou stadium on Sunday night and said he hoped "one day I can return, and not just to say goodbye as a player, as I never got to do".

Eight-time Ballon d'Or winner Messi, Barca's record goalscorer and appearance maker, left for Paris Saint-Germain in 2021 after two decades there because their precarious financial position meant they could not afford to keep him.

"Out of the utmost respect for Messi, the professionals at the club, Barca, and the Barca club members, I believe that now, for me to make speculation that is unrealistic, nor do I think is fair, well, I believe that is not appropriate," Laporta told Catalunya Radio.

The president, who was in charge at the time of Messi's departure, said he did not regret what happened because "Barca is above everything".

Laporta confirmed he would love to hold a match in homage to Messi's career at the rebuilt Camp Nou, once it is fully open.

"Things didn't end the way we would have liked... if, in some way, this tribute can make up for what wasn't done, I think it would be a good thing," explained Laporta. "It would be right that he has the best tribute (match) in the world, and it would be wonderful to have it here, in front of 105,000 fans," he continued.

The president said Inter Miami forward Messi's surprise visit to the stadium on Sunday was a "spontaneous" display of his love of the club.

Messi is currently in Spain with the Argentina national team, where they are training before a friendly against Angola.—AFP

Iraq, UAE battle to keep World Cup dream alive

KUALA LUMPUR: Iraq and the United Arab Emirates will attempt to overcome the disappointment of missing out on an automatic berth at next year's World Cup when they face off on Thursday for another shot at keeping their qualification dreams alive.

The teams meet in Abu Dhabi before reconvening in Basra four days later, with the winners progressing to an intercontinental playoff that will determine the 48th and final qualifier for the expanded tournament in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Both nations go into the matches, which are among the most important in the history of the respective countries, having already squandered opportunities to progress automatically and end lengthy absences from the finals.

Iraq lost out last month to Saudi Arabia in their attempt to book a first World Cup berth since debuting at the tournament in 1986 while Emirati efforts to claim a ticket for the first time since 1990 were denied by Qatar.

The Iraqis will be counting on the experience of coach Graham Arnold to guide them through the playoffs, with the 62-year-old having navigated a series of elimination rounds to qualify his native Australia for the 2022 finals in Qatar.

"We're doing everything we possibly can for Iraq to make sure we qualify," Arnold said last week upon announcing his squad, bolstered by the return of talismanic striker Aymen Hussein from injury.

"I know a lot of the fans and the media were disappointed after the Saudi game, but I have to say I was so proud of the performance of the players in terms of work ethic.

"Defensively we did very well, we didn't concede a goal (against Saudi Arabia and Indonesia) and the work rate, the discipline was great but we need to do better with the ball and put the ball in the back of the net."

Iraq have only scored twice in the four qualifiers since Arnold was appointed in May while the UAE have fared slightly better under Cosmin Olaroiu, netting four times in four matches after the Romanian replaced Paulo Bento.—Reuters

LONDON: England players attend a practice session at the Tottenham Hotspur Training Centre on Wednesday.—Reuters

France face Ukraine in World Cup qualifier, England take on Serbia

PARIS: France captain Kylian Mbappe said Les Bleus would like to remember those affected by the November 13, 2015 Paris attacks when they take on Ukraine in a World Cup qualifier on Thursday — the 10th anniversary of the tragedy that traumatized the nation.

France were playing Germany that day when a suicide bomber detonated an explosive belt near Gate D of the Stade de France, killing one passerby, during the friendly game attended by then president Franois Hollande.

The series of coordinated attacks in Paris killed 130 people. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attacks.

"I would like to say a few words on behalf of the France team, the staff, and the players. I don't know if well have the chance to talk about it tomorrow," Mbappe told a press conference on Wednesday "Tomorrow will be a special day. We wanted to have a thought for those affected (on November 13, 2015). We know it won't be a joyful day, but we want to make people understand that commemorating this day is one of the important things.

"We will try to put a smile on this day but even though we are playing for qualification, we are aware that there are more important things."

France will qualify for next years World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada, if they beat Ukraine.

Ten years ago, Mbappe was not playing for the national team, but he feared for his parents, who lived in the suburbs of Paris.

"I was in Monaco watching the match, and I got some information, the Real Madrid forward said. "There was fear my parents were in Bondy. We didn't know when it was going to stop. Playing 10 years later is special well try to pay tribute to the people affected by that tragic event."

Thursday's game will be played at the Parc des Princes in Paris.

There are only a few staff members who were there; "We know its part of the context of this game, said coach Didier Deschamps, who was on the France bench that night.

Among the players who were at the Stade de France on November 13, 2015, only fullback Lucas Digne will be present on Thursday.

Meanwhile, England will also be in action on Thursday as they host Serbia in their penultimate World Cup qualifier and coach Thomas Tuchel warned Jude Bellingham that the midfielder faces a fight to earn a place in starting lineup at the World Cup.

Bellingham had just returned from shoulder surgery when Tuchel opted against selecting him for the Wales and Latvia matches last month, allowing Aston Villa's Morgan Rogers to shine in the number 10 role.

Rogers' impressive performances have presented Tuchel with an intriguing dilemma as he looks ahead to next year's World Cup.

"Rather than finding a position for the best players to have them on the field, it is maybe better to put everyone in their best position and have a competition," Tuchel told reporters on Wednesday when asked if he would try to fit both players into his team.

"They don't have to be enemies and hate each other. They are respectful and they fight for the same position. Can they play together? Yes, but in a different structure and now is not the moment to change the structure."

Tuchel, who also recalled Phil Foden after he was left out of the previous three England squads, insisted Bellingham and the Manchester City forward both seem happy to be back in the fold.

But he made it clear that England's strong performances without Bellingham and Foden showed they are not guaranteed to waltz back into his side.

"We are obliged to drive our own standards and build what we can build. Now they are back and it is their responsibility to contribute to this and it is what they are doing. The standards are clear."

Group 'K' winners England secured their World Cup berth with a 5-0 rout of Latvia in October. Tuchel has won seven of his eight matches, including six World Cup qualifiers without conceding a single goal. After hosting Serbia and travelling to Albania on Sunday, Tuchel has only two friendlies remaining in March before he has to name his World Cup squad. —Agencies

Asif, Asjad crash out in IBSF worlds quarters

DOHA: Mohammad Asif's IBSF World Snooker Championship title defence ended in the quarter-finals on Wednesday after a 4-3 defeat to Poland's Michal Szubarczyk.

Meanwhile, Asjad Iqbal's campaign also concluded following a lop-sided last-eight loss against England's Harvey Chandler.

The 43-year-old Asif, started strongly on Wednesday in the last 16, beating Iran's Amir Sarkosh 4-2.

But the veteran's defence was halted by Szubarczyk in a high-quality seesaw match.

Asif lost the first two frames as the Polish cueist won the first frame 89-16 and the second 59-51 with a 58 break.

Asif struck back, clinching the next two frames [61-33, 96(96)-13)] to level the match. With the momentum on his side, Asif then took the lead with a brilliant break of 80 in the fifth frame 86-7.

It seemed that Asif would run away with the victory but Szubarczyk responded strongly by taking the sixth frame 87-0 with an 80 break.

Asif — who won the Saarc Championship earlier this year — couldn't hold his nerves in the decider as Szubarczyk fired a 55-break to win the frame 104-42 and end Asif and Pakistan's journey in the competition.

Earlier, Asjad — who downed Hong Kong's Chau Hon Man 4-1 in last-16 —was ousted from the tournament after he lost to Chandler 4-1 (76-31, 19-57, 59-24, 78-40, 60-20).—Agencies

Swimming sensation Yu, 13, stuns again with Asian record

BEIJING: Chinese swimming prodigy Yu Zidi sent shockwaves through the swimming world again with a blistering Asian record time at China's National Games in Shenzhen.

Yu, who turned 13 in October, swam an impressive 2:07:41 to claim gold in the women's 200 metre individual medley on Tuesday.

The schoolgirl from northern Hebei province beat the 2:07:57 her compatriot Ye Shiwen swam at the 2012 London Olympics, months before Yu was even born.

Yu's time, met with huge cheers and gaping jaws from shocked spectators in Shenzhen, was the ninth fastest of all time.

It also made her the second fastest woman this year globally, behind only Canada's world record holder Summer McIntosh.

She knocked nearly two seconds off her previous personal best time, set in Singapore in July.

Yu burst onto the world scene in Singapore by becoming the youngest swimmer in history to win a medal at the World Aquatic Championships, taking bronze as part of China's 4x200m freestyle relay team.

She also finished fourth in each of her three individual events — the 400m medley, 200m butterfly, and 200m medley.

She is shaping as a major threat in future international competitions, including at the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 2028, if her times continue to progress.

Yu, who trains in Hebei and juggles swimming with her school work, took up the sport when she was six as a means of escaping China's searing summer heat.

She first came to national attention last year and drew comparisons at home to Ye Shiwen, who at 16 became the youngest Chinese swimmer to win an Olympic medal when she triumphed in London.—AFP

Raja, Saqib excel

LAHORE: Rijas/Sheikhoo and Seagold/Newage Cables earned contrasting wins in the 13th Maj Gen Saeed-uz-Zaman Janjua Memorial Polo Cup here at the Pakistan Park Cavalry Ground on Wednesday.

In a nail-biting clash, Rijas/Sheikhoo edged out Master Paints 6-5 thanks to Raja Samiuallah, who struck five goals for the winners. Faisal Shehzad struck one.

For Master Paints, Raja Temur Nadeem and Bilal Hayat Noon contributed a brace each while Agha Musa added one.

In the second match, Saqib Khan Khakwani's four-goal show helped SQ Seagold/Newage Cables register a comfortable 9-4 win against SEFA Logistics.

Saqib was supported by Taimur Noon (three goals) and Shiraz Qureshi (two).

For SEFA Logistics, who had a two-goal handicap advantage, Mumtaz Abbas Niazi scored two goals. — Sports Reporter

Wickets tumble across QAT as Shan dazzles with century

LAHORE: Wickets fell in heaps on the second day of the seventh-round matches of the Quaid-e-Azam Trophy on Wednesday, with as many as eight five-wicket hauls recorded across five venues, while Pakistan Test captain Shan Masood stood out as the only centurion of the day.

At the Marghzar Cricket Ground, Islamabad, Multan required a further 288 runs for victory against Sialkot, reaching 103-2 in 30 overs at stumps while chasing 391 after a dramatic 20-wicket day.

Zain Abbas (41 not out off 74 balls) and Waqar Hussain (23 not out off 60) added an unbroken 54-run stand after both openers fell to Hamza Nazar.

Earlier, chaos reigned as both sides lost wickets in clusters. Sialkot's spinners Usama Mir (5-28) and Mehran Mumtaz (5-48) shared all 10 wickets between them to bowl Multan out for 139, handing their side a 149-run first-innings lead. Both registered their third and fourth first-class five-wicket hauls respectively.

Multan hit back through left-armer Ali Usman, who claimed his sixth five-for — and second in the match (5-98 and 5-98) — to leave Sialkot reeling at 101-8.

Tailender Hasan Ali, however, counterattacked with a blistering 91 off 64 balls (eight fours and seven sixes), adding 53 with Afzaal Manzoor (25) and 87 with Usama Mir (18 not out) to set Multan a challenging target.

At the Abbottabad Cricket Stadium, Faisalabad tightened their grip on the contest against Islamabad, securing a 227-run first-innings lead after dismissing the hosts for 159 in reply to their 386.

Pacer Khurram Shahzad bagged his 15th five-wicket haul (5-53), ably supported by Jahandad Khan (3-27) and Ahmed Safi Abdullah (2-43). The trio triggered an 85-7 collapse as Islamabad slumped from 74-3.

Faisalabad were eight without loss at the close. Earlier, Hunain Shah claimed his maiden five-for (5-84) as Faisalabad added 64 runs to their overnight total. Jahandad struck 40 off 46 with four fours and three sixes.

At the Shoaib Akhtar Cricket Stadium, Rawalpindi, Karachi Blues' pacer Saqib Khan produced a career-best 7-34 to bowl out Abbottabad for 191, giving his side a 67-run first-innings advantage.

Shan then dominated proceedings with an unbeaten 114 off 116 balls (14 fours, two sixes) — his 32nd first-class century — guiding Karachi Blues to 202-3 at stumps, 269 ahead overall. He added 98 for the third wicket with Saud Shakeel (33).

Earlier, Khayyam Khan's 59 was the only notable contribution for Abbottabad, who had resumed on 31-3. Saqib bettered his previous best of 6-62 against Multan earlier in the season.

At the Imran Khan Cricket Stadium, Peshawar, Fata enforced the follow-on after bowling out Bahawalpur for 146 in reply to their 396. Only one ball was possible in Bahawalpur's second innings before stumps.

Hayatullah claimed 6-71 to secure Fata a 250-run lead. Earlier, Rehan Afridi fell 12 short of his eighth first-class hundred, scoring 88 off 123 balls with eight boundaries as Fata added 125 runs to their overnight total of 271-5.

At the Diamond Cricket Ground, Islamabad, Peshawar, led by Sajid Khan, ended the day 123 runs ahead of Lahore Whites at 108-2 after gaining a 15-run first-innings lead.

Opener Israrullah was unbeaten on 61 off 103 balls, striking five fours and two sixes. Earlier, Sajid's 5-82 — his 20th five-wicket haul — restricted Lahore Whites to 230. Half-centuries from Qasim Akram (82 off 126) and Ali Zaryab (57 off 133) provided some resistance.—Agencies

Captain hopes Pakistan will do well in inaugural Women's Blind World Cup

LAHORE: Pakistan women's blind cricket team captain Nimra Rafique on Wednesday said her players were well prepared for the inaugural Blind World Cup.

The event, being held in Sri Lanka and India, started on Tuesday.

The Pakistan squad attended a grand reception organised by the Pakistan Blind Cricket Council president Sultan Shah at a local hotel in Lahore on Wednesday.

Speaking on the occasion, Nimra said the team was upbeat to produce a trophy-winning show at the global event.

"Our team is well balanced and we are not nervous, considering it is the first World Cup for blind women cricketers," the skipper said adding that participation in the inaugural World Cup was an honour for every member of the team.

"A two-week training camp for the World Cup was held in Kashmir where the coaches prepared every player mentally and physically on how to meet challenges of the mega event," she added.

"The match against India [on Nov 16] will be the high point [for Pakistan] of this event."

Former Test pacer Aaqib Javed, who was present on the occasion, said that it was a great honour for all the players who were part of the first-ever Blind World Cup for women.

Pakistan play their first match at the World Cup against Sri Lanka on Nov 15 before taking on India the next day. In their third match, Pakistan face Nepal on Nov 18, followed by games against Australia (Nov 19) and the US (Nov 20).

The squad later on Wednesday left for Colombo.

Squad: Bisma Hussain, Rimsha Shabbir, Shumaila Kiran, Qandeel Fatima, Esha Faisal, Sumaira Malik (B1 category); Nimra Rafique (captain), Nusrat Batool, Hooria Malik, Rabbia Javed, Maryam Jahangir (B2 category); Nisha, Mehreen Ali, Armeen Tariq, Noor Fatima, Bushra Ashraf (B3)

Officials: Tahir Mehmood Butt (head coach), Syed Ibrar Hussain Shah (coach); Rubab Zahra (trainer), Shinza Sultan (physio), Wasim Ahmad (media manager).—Sports Reporter

Osimhen, Mbeumo potential key figures in African World Cup play-offs

JOHANNESBURG: Star African strikers Victor Osimhen of Nigeria and Bryan Mbeumo of Cameroon want to grace the 2026 World Cup tournament, but only one of them can succeed.

Nigeria face Gabon and Cameroon meet the Democratic Republic of Congo on Thursday in Rabat in the semi-finals of an African play-offs series for the global showpiece.

The winners clash on Sunday, also in the Moroccan capital, with a place in inter-continental play-offs next March on the line.

Whoever represents Africa will be joined by two teams from Central America/Caribbean region plus Bolivia, New Caledonia and Iraq or UAE with two World Cup slots up for grabs.

Nigeria are firm favourites and Cameroon slight favourites to reach the final, and continue the fight to be among the 48 qualifiers for an expanded World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

When a 10-round African qualifying competition ended last month, Algeria, Cape Verde, Egypt, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia secured qualification as group winners.

Now, the four best runners-up get a second chance, and Osimhen and Mbeumo could play key roles in deciding which country moves closer to giving Africa a 10th representative.

Osimhen scored a hat-trick against Benin in a 4-0 final-round win last month, which enabled Nigeria to pip Burkina Faso on goal difference for the final runners-up slot.

Switching to the Champions League, he notched another treble last week for Galatasaray at Ajax Amsterdam, and is the leading scorer in the competition with six goals.

"I love Victor. He is the best striker in the world," says Eric Chelle, the Ivory Coast-born coach of the Super Eagles.

"It will be very difficult in Morocco," said the tactician who boasts four wins and two draws in competitive matches since taking charge.

Although Gabon had the best record among the four runners-up with eight wins and a draw, they are ranked 36 places below Nigeria in the world and the least fancied of the four contenders.

But if Osimhen and Ademola Lookman, the last two African Player of the Year award winners, can form a formidable strike partnership, Gabon are also able to choose a dynamic duo.

Los Angeles-based Denis Bouanga is among 10 nominees for the 2025 African Player of the Year having scored eight times in World Cup qualifying.

Veteran Olympic de Marseille goal poacher Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang netted seven times in qualifying and, at 36, knows this may be a last chance to feature at a World Cup.

"We have discovered many new players and the team now has a solid core. Gabon are capable of achieving great things," says Bouanga.

Meanwhile, Mbeumo has scored four goals in his last four appearances for Manchester United, helping the Red Devils to a five-match unbeaten Premier League run.

The 26-year-old former Brentford striker was voted player of the month for October in the most watched domestic league in the world.

Belgium-born Cameroon coach Marc Brys hopes Mbeumo can transfer his predatory instincts from England to Morocco and steer the Indomitable Lions to the final.

Cameroon have qualified for the World Cup eight times — an African record — but finished four points behind shock qualifiers Cape Verde in Group 'D'.

Needing maximum points from their final group match at home against Angola to have a chance of overtaking Cape Verde, they disappointed in a 0-0 stalemate.

Only six places in the world rankings separate Cameroon and DR Congo, who will lack injured Newcastle United winger Yoane Wissa.

The Congolese had looked set to be among the group winners before blowing a two-goal lead in a home loss to Senegal.—AFP